

BITING THE HAND THAT FEEDS US? FOOD CHARITY IS NOT ENOUGH!

A survey of food bank users in Halton



Income can solve food insecurity. Food charity does not.

Background

The idea to survey Halton residents with low incomes about their experience with food banks began with a member of Voices for Change Halton (VFCH) telling the group how she felt when asked to provide photo identification of her children in order to use a food bank. Voices for Change Halton had heard many similar stories about food banks during the previous five years. We discussed whether this experience was unique or shared by others, part of a larger pattern.

Voices for Change Halton decided to design and conduct a survey using a participatory action research methodology.¹ Members of VFCH developed the questions, distributed and collected the surveys, and analyzed the results. The survey was designed to bring perspectives from three groups into a public discussion of food charity:

- people who use food banks
- people with low incomes who do not use food banks
- members of the public including people who donate to food banks, and volunteer or work at food banks

Voices for Change Halton began this project acknowledging that food banks (and other forms of food charity) provide important and necessary short-term supports that help people who are poor to survive. But VFCH also has a critical view: it considers food banks a form of food charity, with limits and effects that people who donate to food banks and politicians who have not lived in poverty may not understand.



VFCH has three broad concerns about food banks:

1 The fundamental indignity of going to a food bank.

Food bank personnel work hard to treat people with dignity and respect; nonetheless, that people have to go to a food bank at all affects their dignity.

2 The ineffectiveness of food banks as a strategy to reduce food insecurity.

VFCH members are convinced through their own lived experience, supported by research, that increasing income is the best way to ensure food security. VFCH agrees with the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health² that food charity is not enough to provide adequate amounts of healthy food for people with low incomes.

3 The injustice of food banks.

VFCH believes that Ontario is a wealthy society and that the continued existence of food banks and other forms of food charity over the last thirty years is an unacceptable indicator of persistent poverty and inequality. Governments' reliance on food banks is an abdication of their responsibility to care for all members of society.

¹ *Pragmatics of Community Organization*, Bill Lee. Commonact Press: www.commonact.com

² Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health, 2015. "Response to Food Security". <http://bit.ly/2c5cReh>

Action Agenda on Food Insecurity

Public Awareness

- Why do we have food banks? The problem is food insecurity and the solution is income security. Promote this understanding in:
 - ➔ public policy forums
 - ➔ traditional and social media
 - ➔ food charity promotional materials
- Stop referring to the problem as “hunger” and the solution as “food charity.”

Social Policy

- Increase social assistance and minimum wages to levels that lift people above the poverty line so they can buy food of their choice.
- Increase availability of rent-geared-to-income housing.
- Increase financial supplements for people living in private rental housing.

Food Bank Operations

- Eligibility for food bank assistance should be based on self identification of need.
- Require minimal information at intake: name, address and household composition.
- People should be able to go to any food bank as often as they need to.
- Stop demanding OHIP cards and Social Insurance Numbers as identification.
- Train staff and volunteers to protect privacy of visitors and treat them with respect and dignity.

Where you sit determines where you stand

Social issues are framed for public discussion and action by different voices. People who live in poverty rarely have a voice in most public issues, including discussion of food charity. Members of Voices for Change Halton sit in waiting rooms and line-ups at food banks, and go to community meals and other emergency food programs. This lived experience of poverty informs the group’s stand on the issue of food charity.

Where Voices for Change Halton stands

Voices for Change Halton defines the issue as food insecurity—not hunger—whose root cause is inadequate income. VFCH believes that framing the issue of food insecurity as hunger and the solution as food banks (food charity) fosters the false impression that food charity can meet the needs of people who are poor. Voices for Change Halton believes framing the issue this way masks the need for government to act on the root causes of poverty.

VFCH therefore believes it is time to say that food charity is not enough—even if this sounds like biting the hand that feeds us.

Voices for Change Halton knows that this stand challenges the popular misconception that food charity meets the needs of people who are poor. After thirty years of food charity in Halton, and across Ontario (and indeed across Canada), Voices for Change Halton thinks it is time to challenge the status quo. Food insecurity is no longer a temporary emergency to be addressed by a charity response.

Voices for Change Halton advocates for government policies that:

- increase income—by raising social assistance rates and the minimum wage
- reduce the cost of rental housing
- reduce the cost of and remove other barriers to health benefits (medical, drug and dental)

A civic engagement plan

STEP 1

This survey is a first step in an initiative to focus public attention on the need for income solutions to poverty.

STEP 2

Voices for Change Halton will share its analysis of the survey results with the following groups:

- municipal, regional and provincial decision-makers
- volunteers and staff who work in the food charity sector
- the general public

VFCH's intention is to engage the public and decision-makers in a discussion of the reality and root causes of poverty in Halton, the inadequacy of food charity as a response, and the need to increase incomes to ensure food security for people in Halton with low incomes.

STEP 3

Voices for Change Halton hopes to identify and engage a network of allies to advocate together for measures that increase income security and make food charity unnecessary for people with low incomes.

Food banks and food insecurity: indicators of persistent poverty

- 3,779 individuals received food from food banks in Halton in 2015, according to Food Banks Canada in the HungerCount Report³—a 58 % increase from the 2,393 individuals counted in 2004.
- The cost of the Nutritious Food Basket (a basic healthy diet for two parents and two children) increased 48 % in Halton in the same period, from \$140/week to \$203/week.⁴
- Halton Region's health department reports that 4.3 % of Halton households (7,700) were food insecure in 2013/14.⁵ This rate of food insecurity was relatively constant from 2004 to 2014.

Approximately 15,000 people in Halton may be food insecure, according to research by University of Toronto nutritional science Professor Valerie Tarasuk. She estimates that the number of food-insecure households—low, moderate or severe—is four times the number of people Food Banks Canada reported visiting food banks.

³ A variety of sources report food bank usage in Halton Region; the data here is comparable for the referenced period. Email communication with Diana Stapleton, Research Specialist, Food Banks Canada.

⁴ 2014 Household Food Security and Nutritious Food Basket Indicator Report. <http://bit.ly/2cjZ2K8>

⁵ Email communication with Emma Tucker, Halton's Manager and Senior Epidemiologist, Public Health Surveillance and Evaluation.

⁶ 2014 Household Food Security and Nutritious Food Basket Indicator Report. <http://bit.ly/2cjZ2K8>

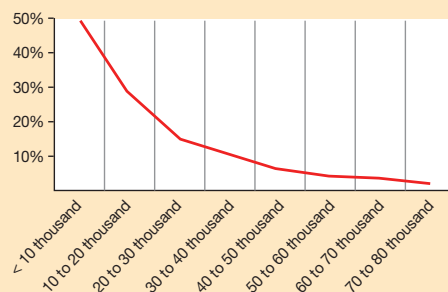
⁷ "The Impact of Food Insecurity on Health". <http://bit.ly/2boYZv4>

⁸ <http://bit.ly/1HBWIoM>

Income can solve food insecurity—food charity does not

Professor Tarasuk's research demonstrates that income is the strongest indicator of food insecurity. "The graph below plots the prevalence of food insecurity against income, adjusted for household size, [showing] the relationship between food insecurity and household income across all household configurations."⁶

Food insecurity by household income



Food insecurity increases the likelihood of poor health⁷



- Food-insecure adults are more vulnerable to chronic conditions, the risk increasing with the severity of food insecurity.
- Exposure to severe food insecurity leaves an indelible mark on children, increasing risks for conditions like asthma, depression and suicidal ideation in adolescence and early childhood.
- Food insecurity makes it difficult for individuals to manage existing chronic health problems such as diabetes and HIV/AIDS.
- Due to scarce resources, food-insecure individuals may forego critical expenses like medication. Another consequence is that health care costs are significantly higher for food-insecure people.⁸

Biting the hand that feeds us?

Highlights of survey results

107 surveys were completed, by people who visited 21 different food banks in Halton Region. The household surveys included 209 adults, 54 children over the age of 18, and 80 children under the age of 18.

86% of respondents said they were really glad that food banks exist.



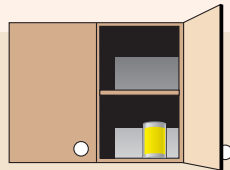
77% of adults in the household reduced the quality of their meals in the last year because there wasn't enough money for food.

73% of respondents thought that a monthly increase of \$500 a month or less would mean they would be able to buy their own food and not have to go to the food bank.



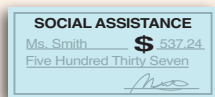
72% of respondents said they were not always satisfied with the quality of the food they received.

70% of respondents reported they were not always satisfied with the amount of food they received.



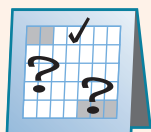
Two-thirds of the 107 respondents indicated dietary or medical requirements were a factor in the foods they could eat.

61% of respondents felt they were always treated with respect at the food bank they visit most often.



57% of respondents reported their source of income as either Ontario Works or ODSP.

55% of respondents found out about the food bank they visit most often by word of mouth/friends.

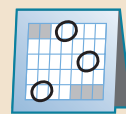


53% of respondents expressed a preference to visit the food bank more often than at present.

51% of respondents said food banks could "improve the general selection of food available" to make visiting a better experience.



43% of adults in the household skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food.



42% of respondents stated that they needed to visit the food bank three times per month or more.

40% of respondents reported they do not tell friends and family they go to a food bank.



22% of respondents reported being asked to provide OHIP cards as identification

14% reported being asked to provide their Social Insurance Number as identification.



Only 4% of respondents were not required to provide proof of income in order to be eligible for food bank services

74% of people responding to the public survey reported that they do NOT expect those who request food to be required to submit proof of income.



74% of people responding to the public survey reported they do NOT worry about 'abuse' when donating to a food bank.



Biting the hand that feeds us?

Highlights of survey results *(continued)*

Respondents with low incomes who do not use food banks answered the question ***"I do not go to a food bank because..."*** in the following ways:

46% said, ***"Other people need the food more than I do."***

22% said they ***"feel too embarrassed to go to a food bank."***

18% said they ***"don't know if the local food bank would accept them."***

9% said they ***"did not know how to find a food bank."***

9% said they were ***"not able to get to a food bank."***



Respondents with low incomes who do not use food banks answered the question ***"I have used a food bank before and would not go back there because ..."*** as follows:

44% of responses were related to quantity or quality of food.

13% said they did not like how people at the food bank treated them.



96% of people who responded to the public survey agreed with the following statement: ***"It's time for government policies that put food in the budget of people who are poor."***



Voices for Change Halton tested support among respondents who visited food banks for the idea that **governments and corporations prefer charity** as a strategy to meet the food security needs of people who are poor. There were high levels of agreement with two statements:

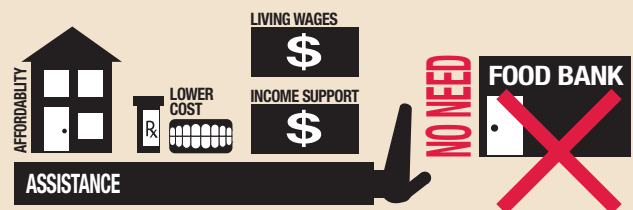
71% of respondents agreed or somewhat agreed that "The Ontario government **chooses to rely** on food banks rather than raise social assistance and the minimum wage."



64% of respondents agree or somewhat agreed that "Corporations **would rather make donations** to volunteer-run food banks **than pay their staff a living wage** or pay more taxes."



Survey respondents who visited food banks were given a list of solutions that, if available, meant they **would not need to go to the food bank**.*



47% – provide rent-geared-to-income housing

38% – provide more affordable rental housing

38% – provide a plan that paid extra costs for health care, medicine and dental care

32% – create a guaranteed annual income

32% – increase the amount of ODSP benefits

29% – raise the minimum wage

26% – increase the amount of Ontario Works benefits

22% – increase CPP/OAS benefits

* Respondents could check as many solutions as applied to their situation (so percentages below add up to more than 100%).

Analysis – through the lens of people with lived experience of poverty

A majority of respondents reported that food banks did not meet all their food needs, and wished they could access food banks more often. A majority also reported satisfaction with many aspects of food bank operations, including:

- comfort with the personal information required in order to be eligible for food bank services
- satisfaction with confidentiality and privacy of information
- low reported number of complaints
- feeling treated with dignity and respect

Members of Voices for Change Halton expressed skepticism about these positive results. One VFCH member commented,

“Overall, the results are surprising, as the VFCH members’ experience seem to be the opposite of what the survey results show. I wonder if that means that the type of person who is a member of VFCH is more vocal about what they feel they deserve vs. a person who might just accept whatever they get.”



Survey respondents were more satisfied with some aspects of food banks than VFCH members expected. VFCH explains:

Afraid to bite the hand that feeds you.

Respondents may express higher levels of satisfaction than they feel, for fear that critical comments will cause the loss of an important resource they need for survival.

Lowered expectations.

People who are poor have to accept what is offered to them, and therefore have lower expectations about the quantity and quality of services they receive.

Loss of privacy accepted as a condition of receiving resources.

Many people who are poor have become conditioned to having to ‘spill their guts’ in order to receive services. It has become normal to lose their privacy to receive services, and therefore not something to complain or be critical about.

Acceptance of context.

This combines the previous two points about lowered expectations and loss of privacy. Going to a food bank by definition requires sacrificing some dignity in order to obtain food. As having to go to a food bank in the first place is an unsatisfying experience, ranking specific aspects of doing so as satisfactory is relative.

Lack of agency as individual respondents.

An individual who is poor and not part of a group may feel saying something critical about a food bank is too great a risk. By contrast, the members of Voices for Change Halton have developed confidence in speaking up and speaking out, in part because of the shared analysis and support that comes with being a member of a group.

Comments by Voices for Change Halton

ON DIGNITY...

"The public may not be aware how much work it takes for people to go to a food bank to get enough food. People visit food banks two or three times in a month if they are permitted, and more than half of respondents (54%) would go more often if they were permitted."

"Food bank administrators work very hard to treat people well. Still, people who go to food banks tell us they feel it diminishes their dignity."

"At the XXXX food bank, once you have waited in line, you go in with a volunteer to pick out your items – you are not allowed to be alone. This shows how people have already lost their dignity."

"People who don't have to go to food banks should imagine what it would feel like to have someone 'chaperone' them as they walked up and down the aisles of a grocery store making their selections. Or imagine what it would be like to have a cashier at the check-out question people about their purchases or limit the quantities they selected or limit the number of times they could come to the grocery store."

ON PRIVACY...

"After working on this survey, I suddenly became aware that people including myself willingly give up their human right to privacy, unintentional as it may be, in order to obtain a service that I need."

"I am concerned about the protection of privacy and personal information, which doesn't appear to be implemented consistently. That some food banks ask for OHIP cards and Social Insurance Numbers as well as notices of assessment, proof of wages, social assistance documents and bank statements is definitely cause for alarm."

"People may feel conditioned to give information to get charity and create a profile of need. Many people who are on social assistance are conditioned to spill their life story to anyone who asks for it as a way to get what they need (not want). We are set up by government agencies to have to share our private and personal information."

ON PERSONAL INFORMATION...

"Proof-of-expense documents should not be asked, because this is a major infringement on privacy. Why should a person have to provide almost as much information as you provide for a mortgage just to be able to get food?"

"Even a Notice of Assessment from Revenue Canada might not prove your income level at the time you need a food bank."

"There should be no intake process required at all for someone to access food from a food bank. Those who show up are in need and should be provided food, not be subject to further destruction of their dignity."



VFCH's mandate for this initiative

Voices for Change Halton's initiative grows out of its mission: "to hold government accountable for its struggling citizens and to expose the unacknowledged truth that there are people living in poverty in Halton." This initiative also reflects the beliefs of VFCH:

"Voices for Change Halton believes in the end of poverty. We believe that shelter, food and dignity are human rights. We believe that poverty in Halton can be eradicated through education, advocacy and activism, working in solidarity with active community partnerships."

Belief Statement

Poverty is not an inevitable feature of our society.

About Voices for Change Halton

Voices for Change Halton is a grass roots organization whose intentions are simple. We believe in the end of poverty. We believe that shelter, food and dignity are human rights. We believe that poverty in Halton can be eradicated through education, advocacy and activism, working in solidarity with active community partnerships. We are making a difference, holding the government accountable for its struggling citizens and exposing the unacknowledged truth that there are people living in poverty in Halton.

About Halton Community Legal Services

Halton Community Legal Services is a community legal clinic funded by Legal Aid Ontario. Voices for Change Halton formed in 2011 with the support of Halton Community Legal Services as an extension of the clinic's commitment to systemic strategies to address poverty and promote human rights. Visit www.haltonlegal.ca for more information. Halton Community Legal Services gratefully acknowledges the support of the Ontario Trillium Foundation, an agency of the Government of Ontario.



Biting The Hand That Feeds Us? A survey of food bank users in Halton can be downloaded at:

www.voicesforchange.ca



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